

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 182 222

SO 012 320

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TITLE Sex Stereotypes as Natural Language Categories.
PUB DATE Apr 79
NOTE 6p.: Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association (Philadelphia, PA, April 1979)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Females: *Identification (Psychological): Language Research: Language Styles: *Males: Psycholinguistics: Sex Role: *Sex Stereotypes: Social Science Research: Speeches: *Structural Analysis

ABSTRACT

Results of research to identify words which are perceived to characterize male and female traits are reported. Ninety-six undergraduate students, 48 male and 48 female, rated 210 adjectives on a five-point scale ranging from "very good example" to "very poor example." Researchers then categorized results according to core (best category representatives), and non-member words. Eleven adjectives were found to represent core traits for the category "men:" achievement oriented, active, adventurous, aggressive, ambitious, assertive, competitive, determined, independent, physically strong, and strong. Seventeen adjectives formed the core for the category "women" including affectionate, attractive, complicated, curious, emotional, gentle, motherly, sentimental, soft-hearted, sympathetic, and talkative. Results also indicate that core members of the category "men" tend to be peripheral rather than non-members of the category "women," and vice versa. This latter finding questions classically held assumptions that sex stereotype categories are polarized with men at one pole of a trait and women at the other. (Author/KC)

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SEP 14 1979

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SEX STEREOTYPES AS NATURAL LANGUAGE CATEGORIES

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In contrast to past research, sex stereotypes may be conceptualized as natural language categories. Rather than studying knowledge of socio-cultural prescriptions for sex-role behavior, the focus is on determining each individual's idea of a typical man or woman in order to identify core (best category representatives), peripheral (moderately good category members) and non-members of the two natural language categories. A second goal was to identify the relationship between the two sex stereotypic categories. Specifically, do the two sex stereotypic categories stand in opposition to one another or do they overlap in category membership?

Forty-eight male and 48 female undergraduates rated 210 adjectives on a 5-point scale anchored by "very good example" and "very poor example" of a typical category member. Half of the males and females rated the target category "women", half rated "men". The adjectives were selected to represent psychological traits found by other researchers to be highly, moderately, and neutrally associated with each of the two sex stereotypes as social prescripts.

Eleven adjectives were found to represent core traits for the category "men" for both male and female subjects. Seventeen adjectives formed the core for the category "women". Most of these core traits from both categories had been identified by other researchers as part of the stereotypes as social prescriptions for sex-role behavior.

Considerable overlap was found between the two sex stereotypic categories themselves. Core members of the sex stereotypic category "men" tended to be peripheral rather than non-members of the category "women", and visa versa.

This latter finding flies in the face of classically held assumptions that the sex stereotypic categories "men" and "women" are polarized such that men are at one pole of a trait and women are at the other. Here, the two sex stereotypes were found to be more similar than different.

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association, Philadelphia, April, 1979.

- (1) Title: Sex Stereotypes as Natural Language Categories
- (2) Purpose: Sex stereotypes have typically been studied within a social and personality framework and conceptualized as sociocultural standards or prescriptions for sex role behavior (Bem, 1974; Broverman, Vogel, Broverman, Clarkson & Rosenkrantz, 1972; Williams & Bennett, 1975; Williams & Best, 1977). The objective in such studies has been to determine individuals' knowledge of these societal prescripts. However, sex stereotypes can also be conceptualized as natural language categories and studied within a psycholinguistic framework where the focus is on determining each subject's own idea of a typical man or woman.

Eleanor Rosch (1973, 1975) has developed a model which can be applied to the study of the sex stereotypic categories "men" and "women." According to Rosch, natural language categories have an internal structure such that all members are not equally good representatives of a category. Core or prototypical members are those rated as the best representatives of a category; peripheral members, while examples of the category, are seen as less representative of the category. A number of natural language categories have been studied and found to have the same characteristic internal structure consisting of a core and periphery; and across subjects, investigators have found considerable agreement as to the degree of representativeness of each category member (Rosch, 1973, 1975; Smith, Rips & Shoben, 1974). The present study sought to identify the core and peripheral traits for the two sex stereotypic categories "men" and "women".

A second objective of the research was to determine how the cores of the two sex stereotypic categories are related. For example, are core psychological characteristics for the category "adult men" seen as non-members of the sex stereotypic category "adult women", and visa versa? Alternately, is there some overlap in the membership of the two categories?

- (3) Subjects: Ninety-six undergraduates (48 males and 48 females between the ages of 17 - 23 years of age served as subjects.
- (4) Procedure: Half of the males and half of the females were randomly assigned to rate the same 210 adjectives on a 5-point scale in terms of how well each of the adjectives fit the subject's own idea of a "typical adult man" (male target group), and half rated the same adjectives for their idea of a "typical adult woman" (female target group). The two scale anchors and the mid-point, respectively were, "very good example," "very poor example" and "moderate example" of the category. These anchors, and the instructions, were adapted from those used by Rosch (1973).

The 210 adjectives represented psychological traits and were selected in the following way. One hundred ninety-two were chosen from among the 300 adjectives on the Adjective Check List (Gough & Heilbrun, 1965) to represent 32 each of the following categories defined by Williams and Best (1977; personal communication): (a) highly characteristic of the male stereotype, (b) highly characteristic of the female stereotype, (c) - (d) moderately characteristic of each of the respective stereotypes, and (e) - (f) neutral with respect to each of the stereotypes. An additional 18 adjectives were selected based on theoretical grounds (Kohlberg, 1966).

Two different alphabetical orders of adjectives (A - Z and Z - A) were balanced across the four groups [sex of subject (2) X sex of target (2)]. Respondants were allowed an average of 4 sec to rate each adjective; the total task took 12 min or less. Subjects were run in groups of 2 - 7 and the same female experimenter ran all subjects.

- (5) **Results and Discussion:** Following Rosch's (1973) definition of a category's core, adjectives with mean ratings of less than 2.0 were designated as forming the core of a category. The eleven adjectives which met this criterion among both male and female subjects for the target category "adult men" and the seventeen items found to define the target category "adult women" are listed in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Eight of the eleven core adjectives for the category "adult men" were items found by Williams and Best (1977) to be highly associated with the male stereotype. Ten of the seventeen adjectives found to form the core of the category "adult women" were identified by Williams and Best as being highly associated with the female stereotype (See Tables 1 and 2).

Thus, although Williams and Best (1977) used a different methodology there was considerable overlap between the core of each category as identified in the current study and the corresponding "focused stereotypes" identified by Williams and Best (1977). There thus appears to be some overlap in sex stereotypes as societal prescripts for sex role behavior (Williams & Best, 1977) and sex stereotypes as natural language categories.

The second major finding in the present study was the relationship between the two natural language categories "men" and "women" with respect to the core traits of each. The mean for each of the eleven core adjectives for the category "adult men" and the seventeen items representing the core female traits are presented in Tables 1 and 2, respectively.

Referencing Table 1, it is possible to compare the mean ratings for the core adjectives for the target category "men" with the means obtained when these same adjectives were rated for the target category "women". Similarly, the mean ratings for the female core adjectives are presented in Table 2 for subjects who rated the target category "women" and for those who rated the target category "men".

Ten of the eleven core adjectives for the category "adult men" were also rated as members of the category "adult women", though they were judged to be less representative of "women" as compared to "men". Only one adjective "physically strong" was not rated as also belonging to the category "adult women" (non-category members were defined as having a mean rating equalling or exceeding 3.5). Therefore, core members of the category "men" were rated as peripheral members of the category "women". (Peripheral members were defined as those adjectives with a mean rating between 2.0 and 3.49.)

A similar overlap in traits occurred across the two categories for the seventeen adjectives judged to be prototypical of the category "adult women". Of these seventeen "female" adjectives, sixteen were found to be peripheral members of the category "adult men", while only one, "motherly", was considered to be a non-member of the male stereotype by both male and female subjects.

- (6) **Conclusions:** The present findings indicate that there is some overlap in sex stereotypes as natural language categories as compared to these stereotypes as social prescripts for sex role behavior (Williams & Best, 1977). Further, and perhaps more surprising, the male and female sex stereotypic categories were found to be more similar than different from each other, since traits which formed the core of one stereotype tended to be peripheral members of the other stereotype.

This latter finding flies in the face of classically held assumptions that the sex stereotypic categories "men" and "women" are polarized such that men are at one pole of a trait and women are at the other (See especially Broverman, et al., 1972; these researchers discuss the "masculine" and "feminine" poles of the characteristics comprising the male and female stereotypes).

These findings also call into question methods of stereotype identification which rely on difference scores derived by subtracting the frequency that a trait is selected as representative of "women" from the frequency that that same trait is chosen as representative of "men" (Bem, 1974; Broverman, et al., 1972; Williams & Best, 1977). Such data manipulations tend to obscure similarities in the membership of the two sex stereotypic categories.

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TABLE 1

Mean Ratings for Adjectives Forming the Core^a of the Category Men for ♂ and ♀ Subjects and Periphery^b of the Category Women

Adjective	Male Subjects		Female Subjects	
	Target Category Rated		Target Category Rated	
	"Men"	"Women"	"Men"	"Women"
Achievement-oriented	1.71	2.46	1.62	2.37
**Active	1.79	2.25	1.67	2.17
**Adventurous	1.75	3.04	1.87	2.02
**Aggressive	1.79	3.12	1.87	2.79
**Ambitious	1.75	2.50	1.71	2.12
**Assertive	1.87	2.75	1.92	2.54
Competitive	1.67	2.83	1.62	2.08
**Determined	1.83	2.29	1.79	2.21
**Independent	1.91	2.83	1.75	2.46
Physically strong	1.71	3.87	1.71	3.67
**Strong	1.71	3.46	1.71	2.58

^a Core items are defined as those with a mean rating of < 2.0

^b Peripheral items are defined as those with a mean rating ≥ 2.0 but $<$

TABLE 2

Mean Ratings for Adjectives Forming the Core^a of the Category Women for ♂ and ♀ Subjects and Periphery^b of the Category Men

Adjective	Male Subjects		Female Subjects	
	Target Category Rated		Target Category Rated	
	"Women"	"Men"	"Women"	"Men"
**Affectionate	1.54	2.04	1.39	1.75
**Attractive	1.54	2.50	1.92	1.96
*Complicated	1.67	2.79	1.71	1.96
**Considerate	1.87	2.21	1.83	2.08
*Curious	1.79	2.29	1.92	2.37
**Emotional	1.46	2.92	1.33	2.58
**Excitable	1.67	2.50	1.79	2.33
**Gentle	1.62	2.62	1.67	2.25
**Kind	1.79	2.21	1.83	2.08
Motherly	1.67	4.12	1.91	4.04
People-oriented	1.67	2.58	1.96	2.25
**Sensitive	1.37	2.67	1.42	2.25
**Sentimental	1.33	2.79	1.46	2.83
Soft	1.62	3.92	1.79	3.25
**Soft-hearted	1.75	2.96	1.92	2.29
**Sympathetic	1.58	2.67	1.58	2.54
**Talkative	1.62	2.96	1.83	2.83

* Adjective was used by Williams & Best (1977).

** Adjective was identified by Williams & Best (1977) as forming part of the "focused" social sex stereotype.